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SUBJECT: SEEKING A PROGRAMMING SURGE IN SYRIA

¶1. SUMMARY: After nearly five years of significantly constrained public outreach options, Embassy Damascus is focused on exploiting new opportunities to engage in more sustained public diplomacy programmatic activity. With a finite number of tools at our disposal, we hope to expand our ability to reach average Syrians. Post proposes a series of public diplomacy initiatives centering on the critical themes that the Secretary identified in her November 2 speech in Marrakesh: job creation/employment; technology and scientific research and education and exchanges. We will need both policy guidance and program/budget support from the Department to make our vision materialize. End Summary.

Opportunity Knocks

¶2. (SBU) Since the White House's June 23, 2009 announcement of its decision to return an ambassador to Damascus, Syrian organizations have approached Embassy Damascus to express interest in partnering with the Embassy. This interest has come from a variety of organizations including those previously resistant to our efforts to cultivate contacts over the last half decade. This interest provides a new opportunity to work with government-approved institutions with which we have had little contact in five years, and to present an alternative images of the U.S. promulgated by the Syrian media. Recent openings include: cooperating with the Ministry of Higher Education and private universities; cooperating with AAMAL, the First Lady's premier organization for disabled children; working with SHEBAB, a quasi-NGO that seeks to prepare young Syrians for private sector employment; supporting Massar, which is creating a network of interactive children's museums all over Syria; and working with BESMA, the children's cancer organization which is training a new generation of nurses and doctors in this critical field. In addition to these organizations, there is a steady drumbeat for more American culture in Syria. 60 percent of Syria's population is under 25 and over 57 percent of that population is believed to be unemployed or underemployed, with few prospects or options for entertainment or employment. In light of these staggering statistics, the recently concluded OIG inspection recommended a cultural surge for Damascus. To fulfill this recommendation, we will depend on the Department to share as many youth-focused cultural programs with us as possible -- even if they are only for short periods.

Embassy Damascus Answers

13. (SBU) Fulbright programs remain the most responsive tool currently at our disposal. There is now a strong desire from Damascus University and other private universities to cooperate with Fulbright, especially in critical fields like higher education management, business, marketing and management. We are already utilizing the Fulbright Visiting Specialist program as a way to bring American expertise to organizations that desperately need and want it. AAMAL is chaired personally by the First Lady, and she has issued a clear mandate to develop a relationship with the U.S. Embassy to improve the quality and methods of teaching and training the disabled. AAMAL's board approved cooperation with the Fulbright Specialist program and would like as many as five during FY10 (post is limited to five specialists per FY); AAMAL is anxious to affiliate a Fulbright Scholar, as well. We are also looking for ways to use the Fulbright Specialist Program and the IVLP to support SHEBAB, Massar and BESMA. Each of these "private" organizations represents real opportunities for the U.S. to influence key institutions in critical fields of education and entrepreneurship.

Other projects planned for FY10 include:

-- Hosting an information technology delegation organized by S/P to Damascus to probe interest in explaining the loosening of U.S. restrictions on telecoms and perhaps to explore the possibility of private-sector investment to establish a computer training center in Syria. IT sanctions are a major source of frustration inside Syria, and it would help our policy and PD outreach efforts to demonstrate a tangible benefit of Washington's decision to ease restrictions in the IT area.

-- In the cultural exchanges domain, Embassy Damascus plans to build on its previous support for two major programs: raising awareness on environmental issues and sustainable urban development. We hope to organize a conference around these and other issues in the spring of 2010. Given that more than 25% of Syria's economy is based on agriculture and a severe drought has caused massive rural to urban outmigration we believe there is an important nexus between agriculture, agri-business, the environment and sustainable urban development.

-- Post will again silently fund the Tanenbaum Foundation's participation in an interfaith dialogue forum in the second quarter of this year.

-- Embassy participation in the 2010 DOX BOX film festival to be held in March, 2010. We hope to contribute by bringing Jewish-American filmmaker Frederick Wiseman (per the conference organizer's request) to screen several of his films, participate in Q&A sessions, and conduct master classes with Syrian filmmakers. We would also like to obtain the screening rights to the Wiseman films that will be shown, donate the Wiseman DVDs and rights to DOX BOX, and pay for the translation and subtitling of the films. We also want to screen Harlan County, USA and other American films.

-- For the first time ever, the organizers of the Saint Elian Cultural Festival in Homs requested Embassy participation in their March 2010 festival. Post will request an American classical musician for performances and master classes at the university in Homs.

-- Post would also like to bring a break dancing troupe to Syria for a series of youth-specific engagements all over the country.

-- Post would like to undertake a series of SCPs during FY10 to support several of the above organizations in creating long-term institutional linkages in the U.S.

Helping Us Over the Hurdles

14. (SBU) Post needs Washington's help in overcoming several challenges to translating our vision into reality:

-- Sanctions policy: Multiple layers of U.S. sanctions apply to U.S. activities. In particular, we need explicit guidance on whether a waiver will be required for post to fully support the DOX BOX film festival.

-- Limitations of current program options: Universities and other organizations are anxious to see us bring U.S. experts to Syria, but we do not have a program into which we can tap now to provide long-term academic/professional expertise in several of the critical fields detailed above. We are coordinating closely with ECA on changes to the Fulbright solicitation for FY11, and we are drawing heavily upon the Fulbright Specialist program. But we remain limited to five specialists per FY. Post must underwrite the cost of their per diem and accommodations here, and the time frame is often not long enough for some organizations to build meaningful partnerships. Post would be extremely grateful if the Department could identify a stop-gap program to help us meet the needs of local institutions until Fulbright can re-take center stage in Syria.

-- Funding: As noted above, post would like to create SCPs - at least three - for key partner institutions. We request additional IVLP funding to do so and we may also require budget support for other elements of our initiatives.

15. (SBU) COMMENT: Post is eager to implement the priorities outlined by the Secretary in her November 2 speech in Marrakesh. The thawing of bilateral relations is enabling the Embassy to rebuild relations after a five year freeze. We have a rare opportunity to re-connect with some 20 million Syrians and have a number of different ways in which we can do so. Post appreciates Department support for its activities, and hopes assistance and guidance will be forthcoming to launch a programming surge in Syria.
HUNTER